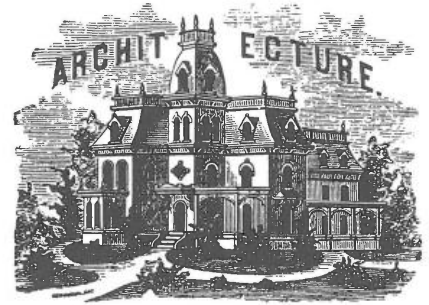


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Robert S. Peabody

Peabody and Stearns

Among the prestigious architectural firms which worked in Maine during the nineteenth century, Peabody and Stearns was one of the best known. As the leading New England architects after the death of H. H. Richardson in 1886, this Boston partnership received more than one thousand commissions between 1870 and 1917. Peabody and Stearns' work in Maine is comprised of residential, public, ecclesiastical, and commercial architecture. Their Shingle Style residences on Mt. Desert and Islesboro are a record of the firm's work in that idiom—from the first summer house in Northeast Harbor in 1881 to the last of their Maine cottages in 1905-06.

Robert Swain Peabody (1845-1917) was the chief designer, while John Goddard Stearns, Jr. (1843-1917) supervised engineering and construction. The former was educated at Harvard, at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, and served for a time as a trustee of Harvard and a lecturer at its architectural school. Stearns graduated from Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard with a B.S. in Engineering. Both men worked in the office of Ware and Van Brunt before establishing their own partnership. A number of important architects trained under Peabody, who was known to allow his draftsmen considerable responsibility in design.¹

The Shingle Style cottages of Maine were conceived as informal retreats for the wealthy families of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia to remove themselves from the hot cities and enjoy the brief and exquisite summer months the coast offers. The first of these to be planned by Peabody and Stearns was for Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard University and a founder of the summer colony at Northeast Harbor (Figure 1). It was the first house on the eastern side of the Harbor, and its simple rustic character set the tone for much of what was to be built in that community. The original house was boxy and inorganic in form. Constructed in 1881 at a cost of \$6,840, it is a fairly simple shape in a wooded site with an ocean view. The interior is modestly detailed. On the exterior, one can see the beginning of the firm's Shingle Style vocabulary of clapboards on the first story with shingles sheathing the form above.

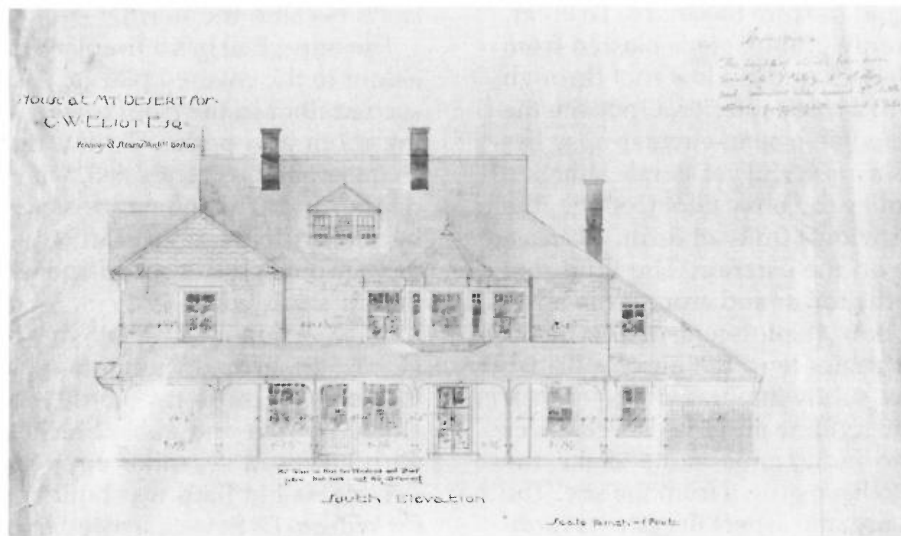


Figure 1. South Elevation of Charles W. Eliot Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1881 drawing (Courtesy of Boston Public Library).

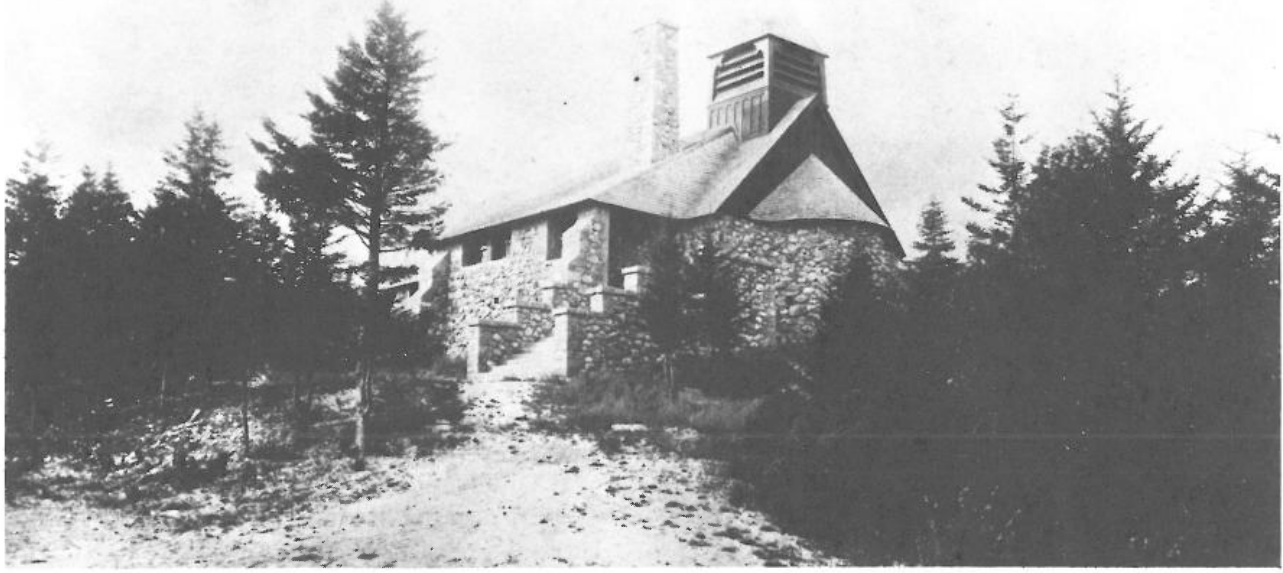


Figure 2. Union Church, Northeast Harbor, c. 1890 view (MHPC).

The entry to the Eliot Cottage opens into a living hall which contains stairs and a fireplace. A glazed door leads to the southern piazza with its ocean view. To the west is the library and to the east the dining room, kitchen, and china closet. Each of the upstairs rooms has a unique view and character, varied by the shape of the room, the fenestration, and the shapes of the dormers and bays.

Peabody and Stearns returned to Northeast Harbor for the Union Church of 1887 (Figure 2). Charles Eliot, a son of the Harvard President and an important associate of Frederick Law Olmsted, brought the plans to Maine in April of that year. Sited to overlook the major intersection in the village, the building sits at the front of Schoolhouse Ledge. With a forest of trees behind, the fieldstone structure is set upon a massive granite base constructed of boulders from the shore. To enter, one climbs close to twenty granite steps blasted from an island quarry and passes under a low roof through a heavy wooden door to a rustic interior. Opposite the entrance is the organ, while a semi-circular apse lies to the right. The roof is a masterful yet simple shingled composition. Here, unlike the boxy Eliot Cottage, the rooflines and tower provide a unity of form, expressing the interior shape on the exterior. The fluid roof curves eastward from the tower and around the apse. This effects a gentle flow reminiscent of the ocean waves. Half-timbered gables lend the air of a British country church and are subtly integrated into each of the elevations. The low roofline and the curved eaves of the tower atop the indigenous stone make the church appear almost to have grown from the site. The building possesses an organic aspect despite its traditional cruciform plan. This compositional technique is further developed in the remainder of the firm's Shingle Style work in Maine.

Ten years later, in 1897, Peabody and Stearns designed a summer house for William R. Dupee on Islesboro. This structure, with nine major bedrooms and four for servants, begins to demonstrate why one biographer referred to Peabody as "The Tower Builder".² Here Peabody utilizes protruding gables and dormers as well as a single octagonal tower and a two story piazza to create a varied and delightful form. The clapboarded tower anchors the front of the house where the entry porch, skewed forty-five degrees, provides a break from the shingled exterior. The ocean side is dominated by an enormous piazza running the entire length of the family section of the house. Built sixteen years after the Eliot House, the Dupee residence demonstrates changing concepts in cottage design for coastal communities in which larger, more formal mansions became the norm.

The entry hall has a fireplace flanked by a nook and a door to the covered piazza. A staircase climbs to the second floor in the front tower. To the left are the living room and parlor. To the right is a dining room, chamber, and servant's hall, with the kitchen and laundry beyond. The rooms are connected to the main hall by sliding doors which can be closed for warmth and privacy on foggy days and opened to the light and activity of sunny days.

A 1902 remodelling by the Boston architects for H. T. Sloane documents changing architectural fashions. In these revisions, the house lost its ogee-shaped porch and gable brackets, becoming austere with enclosed verandas supported by plain posts.

York Hall in Bath was built between 1896 and 1898 for William D. Sewall, a member of the prominent shipbuilding family (Figure 3). In the work of Peabody and Stearns, there are only three clapboarded Georgian Revival houses, this being one of them. Peabody had

a long-standing interest in American Colonial architecture. The house was built at a cost of \$22,700 and reflects the more academic treatment favored by most architects of the period. Intricately carved Corinthian columns support the pediment at the center of the facade, while the curved projecting bay on the north side contains the window to light the grand stair and hall, a device frequently used in the firm's larger summer homes.

The spacious interior, as described in the following contemporary account, makes York Hall one of the finest examples of Georgian Revival residential architecture in Maine:

Passing through the doorway one enters a spacious reception hall, with a broad, winding stairway on the farther end. On the left is the dining room, on the right, the drawing room. Adjoining the latter apartment is the library, in the northeastern corner. These rooms, with the reception hall are included in the main apartments on the street floor. Each has richly tiled fireplaces with mantel spaces very high and strictly colonial. Broad, sliding doors when open, will make the lower floor seem like a palace ballroom.³

With the completion of the Dupee and Sewall Houses, Gilkey Farm House was begun in 1898 on Islesboro for Henry S. Howe (Figures 4 & 5). Now demolished, the house fronted the shore, and the site included a tennis court, dock, and caretaker's cottage. The plans, elevations, and sole surviving photograph suggest a more formal and simple composition than the Dupee House. The eave of the inland elevation was supported just above the first story after swooping down from the gable above the third. Penetrating this plane were five dormers and a gambrel roof. The roof and siding shingles were double depth every fifth row, giving the surface a horizontal bearing and the firm a trademark. As in the Dupee House, small diamond shaped patterns decorate the facade in the gable points. There was a play of scale in the low eave, suggesting a house smaller than its actual size. Here, again, the architect strove to suggest the rustic style of life, removed from the world of commerce and industry.

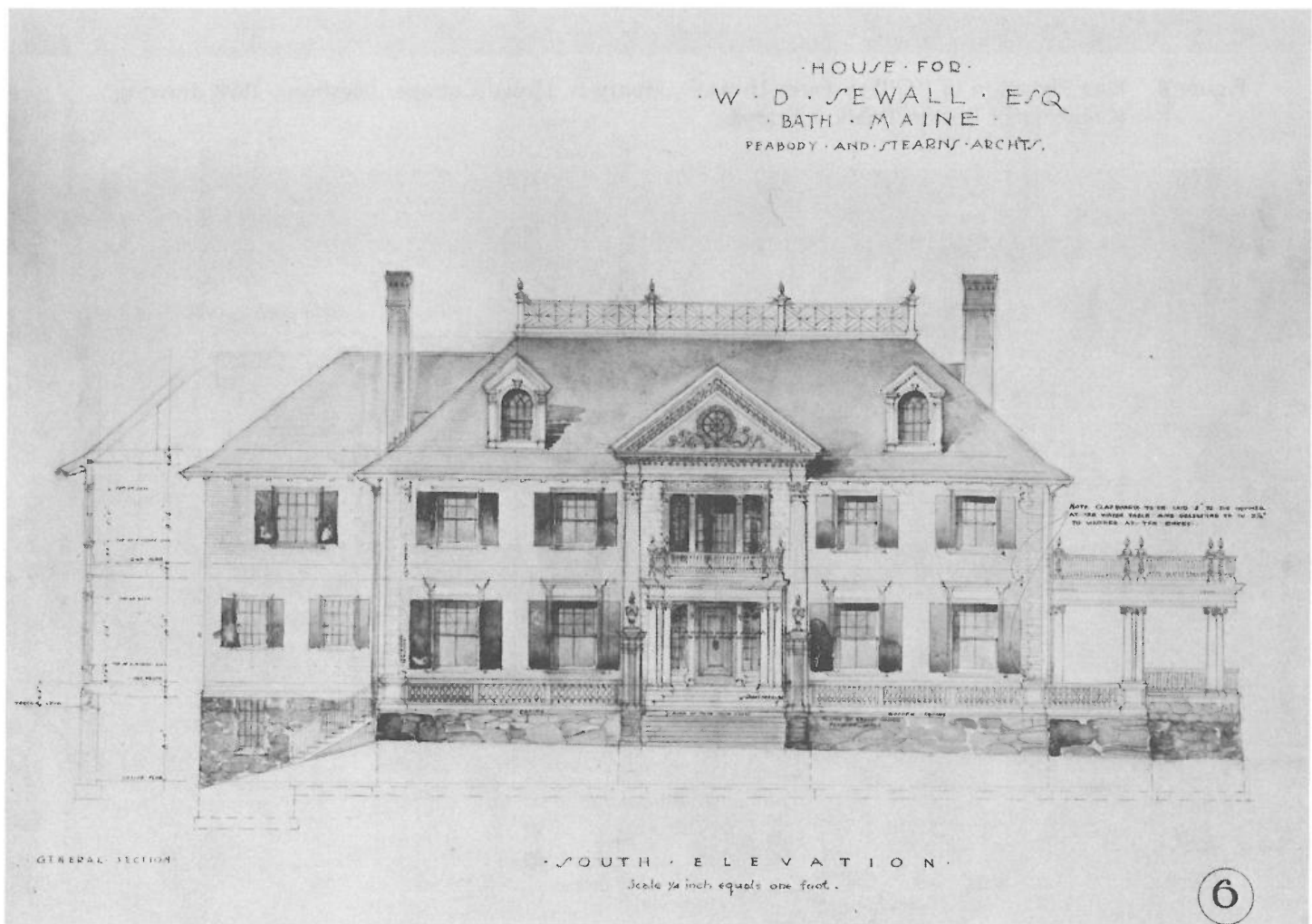


Figure 3. South Elevation of William D. Sewall House, Bath, 1896 drawing (Courtesy of Boston Public Library).

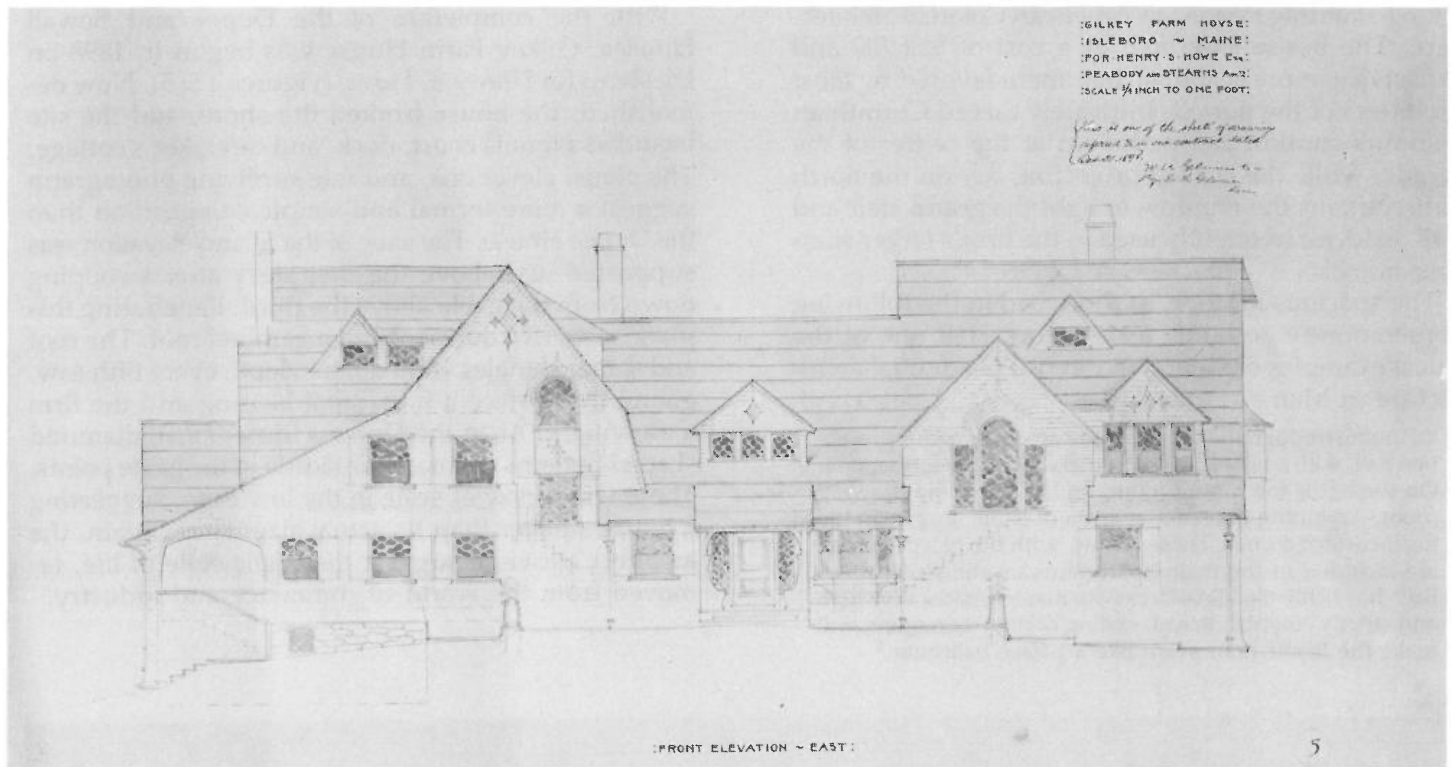


Figure 4. East Elevation of "Gilkey Farm House", Henry S. Howe Cottage, Islesboro, 1898 drawing (Courtesy of Boston Public Library).



Figure 5. Transverse Sections of "Gilkey Farm House", Henry S. Howe Cottage, Islesboro, 1898 drawing (Courtesy of Boston Public Library).

The ocean side was much more symmetrical. A central dormer was flanked by two gables. Beyond these, on either side, were symmetrical covered piazzas sheltering a porch which opened toward a formal garden. This was the first manifestation of the symmetrical protruding piazzas, later seen in many of Peabody's meadow-sited houses in Maine. These porches facilitated circulation and provided a sense of enclosure.

From the front door, one passed under a balcony to a two story entry hall with a fireplace. Through sliding doors were the dining room, library, and porches beyond. Looking up through arched timbers was a bay window from one of the bedrooms protruding into the hall—a curious play on the hall as interior and exterior. Looking back toward the front door, there was another timbered arch beneath which was a second floor balcony.

In 1902 a seaside house was built on a point in Northeast Harbor, opposite the municipal pier, for the Rev. F. G. Peabody, the architect's brother (Figure 6). The house is a simple one, breaking little new ground. An octagonal stair tower, the layering of roof shingles, half-timbering, and multiple dormers create the composition, which rises in mass and complexity toward the shore. Despite the simplicity of detailing, the house serves as an anchor in the harbor scene. Its sculptural shape is interesting from afar, without being insistent—the perfect summer retreat for a rector.

Completed one year later in 1903 is the massive cottage for James F. Rhodes atop a rocky crag in Seal Harbor. From the road, the house affects a quiet demeanor, but on the ocean side it sits angled on the rock. Lovely views to the southeast and southwest are captured in the bay windows. Again, the first floor

rooms are divided by sliding doors which may be opened on the bright summer days and closed against the cool foggy or evening breezes. Extending off the living room lies the covered piazza, the roof of which unfortunately has been removed. Half-timbering is used on all of the major gables. The interstices are painted yellow, and the timbers a weathered gray, thus accentuating detail. This extensive use of Tudor Style trim became characteristic of the firm's late residential Shingle Style work.

In the same year in Northeast Harbor, Mrs. W. T. Blodgett built a house for herself and her daughter at a cost of \$33,000 (Figures 7 & 8). With seven bedrooms (later enlarged to nine), and five for the staff, the house is the grandest shingled house designed by the firm in Maine. The first floor plan encourages free circulation, using two outside porches and a hallway, besides the main axes of the rooms. The first axis runs from the front door through the stair hall, an oval room, and out to the back porch. The second also runs through the oval room, linking the living and dining rooms. Off these rooms lie the symmetrical porches. These complete the circulation pattern and protect the back porches from wind and noise.

Rich in detail, the exterior of the house shows the mark of a mature designer with a seemingly limitless budget. All gables are half-timbered. The street side has two gables, of which one is actually a large dormer 25 feet across. The glazing, below the gray and yellow half-timbering, is of stained glass with the words "Bien venus" or "Welcome". This dormer provides the lantern for the stairway and is the only direct source of light for the main hall. Here, as in the Gilkey Farm Cottage, the roof slopes all the way from the third story to the first, presenting a deceptively compact composition to the street.

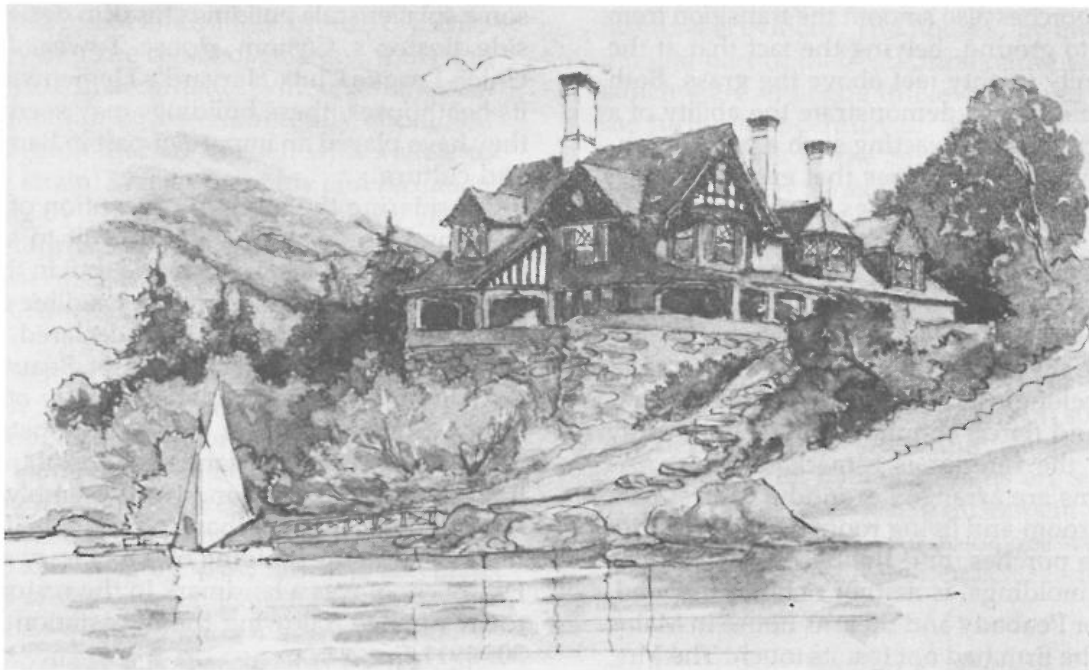


Figure 6. Rev. F. G. Peabody Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1902 drawing (Courtesy of Boston Architectural Center).

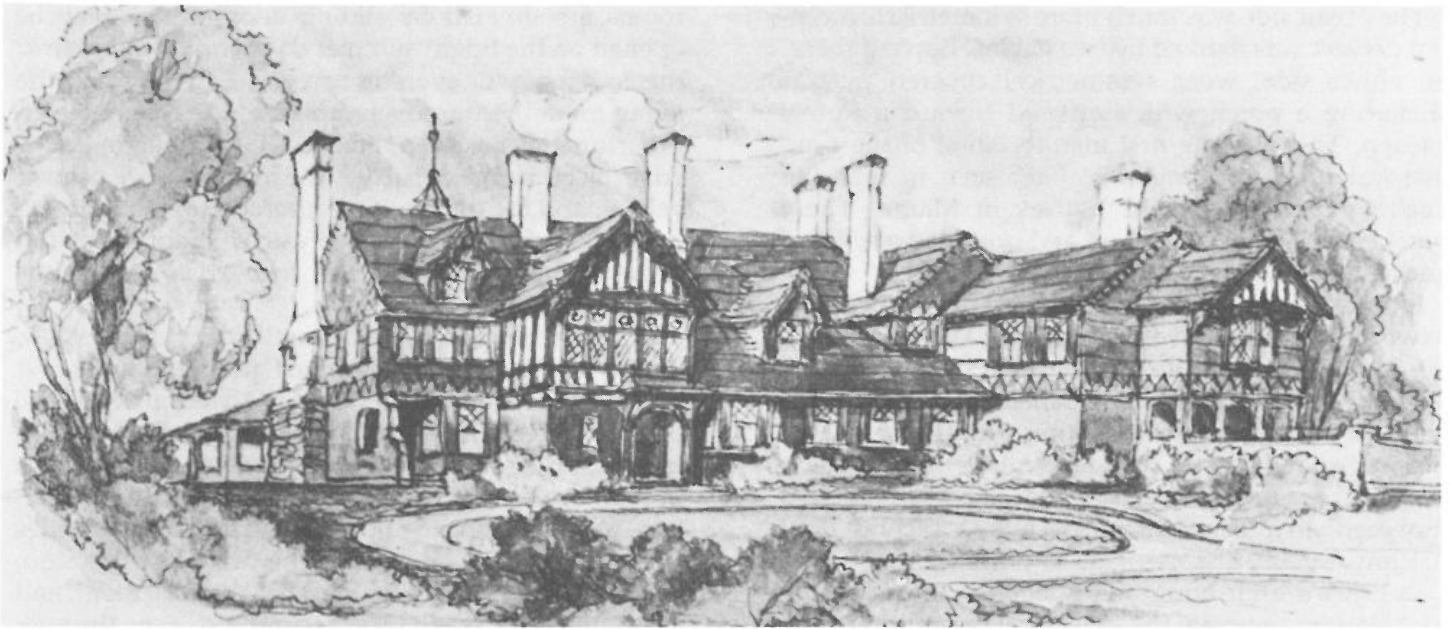


Figure 7. Mrs. W. T. Blodgett Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1903 drawing (Courtesy of Boston Architectural Center).

Toward the ocean, however, the effect is entirely different. The house is an explosion of activity. A large octagonal tower dominates one side of this elevation and contains the living room bay and two bedrooms. This is balanced on the other side by a gable (with "trunk room" inside), crowning the dining room and the master bedroom. Between the two gables is a porch, a balcony, and two rounded dormers.

The flaring chimneys and curved eaves mitigate the verticality of the facade, as did the subtle triangular shingle pattern on the second story skirt above the clapboard first story—a feature regrettably not replaced. The extending porches also smooth the transition from main building to ground, belying the fact that at the roof they are fully twenty feet above the grass. Both the plans and elevations demonstrate the ability of a master architect at work, exacting such a perfect density and combination of textures that even the omission of patterned shingles makes the facade out of balance.

Built in 1903, the George W. C. Drexel House on Islesboro lacks the rootedness of the Blodgett House. Situated on a promontory facing east, this house also reaches out with the symmetrical porches, but with less of a sense of belonging to its site. The building has curved eaves and flared chimneys but is awkwardly arranged, and the interior is remarkably stark. As usual, the rooms are arranged around a central hall, but the dining room and living room do not link with their respective porches, and the decoration, largely identical stock moldings, is neither rich nor inspired.

The last major Peabody and Stearns house in Maine demonstrates the firm had not lost its touch. The Mrs. R. H. Harte House was built in Northeast Harbor in 1905-06 for \$23,757 and shows far greater imagination, as one can see in a watercolor by Peabody. The summer

cottage was destroyed by fire. Plans suggest a sturdy house anchored at one end by a pair of chimneys with the servant's wing stretching up the hill. Facing the ocean are a large number of bays, half-timbered gables, and a massive stone porch, rising up from the ground as though to buttress the major end. Here, again, Peabody shows a sensitivity to the site and a command of the placement of a building in an interesting environment.

Five years after the Harte House, Peabody demonstrated his ability in designing public and commercial structures. In his work in Maine, we can see the handsome smaller scale buildings his firm designed. Alongside Boston's Custom House Tower, New York's Union League Club, Harvard's Hemenway Gym, and its boathouses, these buildings may seem minor. But they have played an important part in Bangor's history and culture.

Considering the modern conception of quality and building fashion, it may be difficult to see Bangor's High School and Library as grand, but in their day they were viewed as spectacular. The headline in the *Bangor Daily News* on December 7, 1912 declared, "New High School and Library are Models of Beauty and Convenience . . . By Far Superior to Any of Their Kind in the State of Maine. Colossal Construction Job. Millions of Brick, Thousands of Tons of Iron and Steel in Temples of Education. The Assembly Hall in the High School is Larger than an Ordinary Theatre . . ." It is clear that the building of the Library and adjacent High School was a landmark in the restoration of the town's image following the devastation of the April 30, 1911 fire.

Of the two, the Bangor Public Library, erected at a cost of more than a half-million dollars, is more appealing to the modern eye in its Italian Renaissance



Figure 8. Mrs. W. T. Blodgett Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1903, 1985 view by Weston F. Milliken.

Style (Figure 9). A contemporary headline proclaims, "New Library Building Will Be By Far Finest in Maine"⁴ The exterior of the building is brick, detailed in granite, marble, and terra cotta. Inside, large reading rooms with operable fireplaces flank the main hall, which contains the circulation desk and the grand marble stair. The skylit second floor rooms provide space for lectures and displays. The grand stair is lit, to quote a contemporary account, by a "double dome of glass and steel, from which is to be suspended a massive and ornate chandelier containing white opal candles. Encircling the base of the dome are twelve tablets, embellished with a wealth of decorative detail and inscribed to famous men of letters" such as Longfellow, Hawthorne, Parkman, and Emerson.⁵

Bangor High School inspired similar acclaim: "It is easily the largest and finest [high school] in Maine, and will compare favorably with any educational building in New England. The total cost is \$375,000, and it is thoroughly modern and up-to-date in every particular".⁶ With concern about fire being paramount, the building was constructed to be as fireproof as possible, using the most recent innovations in such construction. Further, even "The colors of ceilings, walls and window shades are in accordance with recommendations of a commission of experts recently appointed by the city of Boston and are chosen with a view to minimizing eye strain. Signals for study and recitation periods are rung by electricity in all rooms by clocks that operate automatically. A complete system of telephones connects all rooms with the principal's office".⁷ In short, the building was of state-of-the-art construction.

The Bangor High School dedication was of such importance that the 1,000 seat auditorium was used. The mayor, state superintendent of schools, prominent educators, and members of the building committee all participated. In an elaborate ceremony, the keys were handed from the building committee to the builder, to the architect, and then to the mayor, who accepted them on behalf of the city. Concluding his remarks, Robert S. Peabody quoted Peckersniff from Dickens, the architect who made this speech: "My friends, my duty is to build, not to speak. To act, not to talk. I deal with bricks and mortar, not with language. I am affected. God bless you!"

With the firm's tour de force in Bangor came another commission in the city, the Exchange Building for the Bangor Real Estate Company. As described by the *Bangor Daily News*, "The new structure of granite and light colored brick shows imposing facades in the Italian Renaissance style, and it will be one of the handsomest buildings in Maine—of metropolitan aspect and of the most approved design for comfort and convenience in its three stores and fifty five suites of offices. The location is one of the very best in Bangor—on a corner long devoted to financial and mercantile purposes, in the heart of the business section."⁸ A sturdy six story building of tan brick and terra-cotta, it stands hardly changed today. The convenience of an Otis elevator is commonplace today, but the stature that this building, the Library, and the High School enjoyed in their day should not be overlooked.

Although only a fraction of their commissions, the Peabody and Stearns designs in Maine reflect the main current of their work in the Shingle Style. From the construction of the Eliot Cottage to the completion of the Harte Cottage, a clear progression of architectural fashions is evident. The houses, by and large, are an integral part of their site, unlike the larger mansions which were in vogue in Newport and Bar Harbor at the turn-of-the-century.

The medium of the Shingle Style permitted chief designer Robert Swain Peabody to create his compositions within fairly standard perimeters. Patterns in the shingle surface, half-timbering, a variety of dormers and clapboarding all are combined effectively. Curved eaves and flared chimneys are adopted to settle these large buildings comfortably on their sites. The room arrangement and sliding doors between them permits both flow and privacy, depending on social needs and weather conditions—constantly changing in a resort community. The Bangor designs are substantial and well crafted. A good deal of excitement was generated by their construction, and accolades were heaped on the architects—a feat less often achieved in the modern age.

Weston F. Milliken
San Francisco, California
January, 1987



Figure 9. Bangor Public Library, c. 1915 view (MHPC).

NOTES

- ¹ Wheaton A. Holden, "The Peabody Touch", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, May, 1973, pp. 114-131.
- ² Julius A. Schweinfurth, "Robert Swain Peabody, Tower Builder, 1845-1917", *The American Architect*, September 5, 1926, pp. 180-191.
- ³ *Industrial Journal*, Bangor, February 5, 1897.
- ⁴ *Bangor Daily News*, November 21, 1913.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Industrial Journal*, Bangor, December, 1913, pp. 7-9.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Bangor Daily News*, July 25, 1912.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY PEABODY AND STEARNS

Charles W. Eliot Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1881, Altered.
 Union Church, Northeast Harbor, 1887, Addition in 1913, Extant.
 James Garland Cottage, Bar Harbor, 1891, Not Executed.
 W. W. Vaughn Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1893, Alterations in 1905, Destroyed.
 William D. Sewall House, Bath, 1896-98, Extant.
 William R. Dupee Cottage, Islesboro, 1897-98, Alterations in 1902 for H. T. Sloane, Extant.
 "Gilkey Farm House", Henry S. Howe Cottage, Islesboro, 1898, Destroyed.

James Lawrence Cottage, Islesboro, 1900, Extant.
 Rev. F. G. Peabody Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1902, Extant.
 James F. Rhodes Cottage, Seal Harbor, 1902-03, Extant.
 Mrs. W. T. Blodgett Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1903, Alterations in 1917, Extant.
 George W. C. Drexel Cottage, Islesboro, 1903, Extant.
 Mrs. R. H. Harte Cottage, Northeast Harbor, 1905-06, Alterations in 1912, Destroyed.
 W. W. Vaughn Cottage No. 2, Northeast Harbor, Additions and Alterations, 1909, Extant.
 Bangor Public Library, 1911-14, Extant.
 Bangor High School, 1912-14, Extant.
 Exchange Building for Bangor Real Estate Corporation, 1912, Extant.
 G. E. Woodward House, Bangor, Alterations, 1914, Unlocated.
 Carroll S. Tyson Cottage, Northeast Harbor, Additions and Alterations, 1915, Extant.
 Northeast Harbor Library, Addition, 1915, Extant.
 Livingston Biddle Stable, Islesboro, Unlocated.
 George W. C. Drexel Stable, Islesboro, Unlocated.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

Drawings for most of Peabody and Stearns' Maine commissions are at the Boston Public Library. Sketches by Peabody for the Union Church, the Peabody Cottage, the Blodgett Cottage, and the Harte Cottage, all at Northeast Harbor, are in the collection of the Boston Architectural Center.

Photograph of Robert S. Peabody
 Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives

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